Tacitus was one of the greatest historians, though not very influential in antiquity, when only a few authors seem to have taken any notice of him, as e.g. Ammianus Marcellinus, Sulpicius Severus or Orosius, and even less influential in the Middle Ages: For he was known in the Carolingian age, but disappeared after that for centuries¹). It was only in the fourteenth century that his histories were read again, and during the following centuries, especially after 1570 and the work of Muretus and Lipsius, he became more and more popular, mainly in France, not as a stylist—or only in exceptional cases—but as a writer, as a moralist and as a thinker, i.e. for his character portrayals, for his moral ideas and for his contributions to political thought.

Was he ever regarded as a model of historiography? Does he meet modern standards of the writing of history, did he meet the ancient standards and which were they? Was he trying to continue and uphold the traditions of the Roman republic? Did he conform to his time, did he allow his work to be influenced by the nature of the new political system and endeavour to fulfil the expectations of his own contemporaries? What was it that was expected of a

¹) Parts of this paper were presented on May 20th, 1986 at the Department of Classics of the University of Tel Aviv; my thanks are due to professors Applebaum, Glucker, Perlman and their colleagues for the invitation and the helpful comments during the discussion.

historian in antiquity? Against whom should one measure Tacitus’ works?

Is he to be measured against Herodotus who claimed to be greatly concerned about the accuracy of what he wrote and was anxious to discern and explain both the motives of those who acted and the causes of historical developments in general; who incorporated stories by which he tried to give an explanation or interpretation of events or actions, though often such anecdotes and stories, fabulae as Cicero calls them (de leg. I 5), are manifestly fictitious?

Is Tacitus to be measured against Thucydides who was even more concerned than Herodotus that what he wrote was true and accurate and, moreover, that it could be accounted for rationally? Yet, he imposed strict limitations on his work, confining himself to the Peloponnesian war, more exactly to political and military activities during that war, omitting what one might call cultural life and even many issues of home policy. Moreover, for the sake of his chronological system he separated events that belong together, thus sometimes rather hindering than furthering historical insight.

Is Tacitus to be measured against the Hellenistic historians of whom some were very generous in admitting θαυμάσια and anecdotes of all kind, like Theopompus (mentioned with Herodotus by Cicero de leg. I 5), others in emphasizing the dramatic aspects of history or the moral lessons one may derive from it, while yet others like Polybius insisted even more rigorously than Thucydides on the truth and usefulness of their account?

The truth can be very dull, as the annales maximi must have been, so that the annalists in Rome began to invent stories to give colour to the lists of magistrates and omen and to fill in the gaps, while Cato (frg. 77 Peter), Coelius Antipater and others rebelled against this tradition in other ways. Is Tacitus to be measured against them or against Sempronius Asellio who complained that the annales fail to awaken people’s responsibility towards the res publica and who even said that to record who was consul when a war broke out or came to an end or what happened during a war—id fabulas pueris est narrare, non historias scribere (frg. 2 Peter)?

Or should Livy be the measuring rod who tries to give a full, reliable and balanced account and, by paying special attention to the major actors on the scene and passing moral judgments on their